Vocabulary intervention - putting it in context

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Welcome to the Spring Edition of the Afasic Abstract. As the Bercow Review continues to examine services for children and young people with speech, language and communication difficulties, we highlight three research projects designed to enhance children and young people's language and their future opportunities.

All three projects depend on collaboration between schools and speech and language therapy services, raising interesting and important questions about the children we work with and the best ways to support language and learning. Further references for these projects can be obtained from the authors.

Please continue to write or e-mail us at j.dockrell@ioe.ac.uk or geoff.lindsay@warwick.ac.uk. We are particularly keen to hear from practitioners who are involved in innovative services.

About the editors

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Enhancing language and communication in secondary schools (ELCISS)

Victoria Joffe, City University *describes an ambitious project in secondary schools*

"Secondary schools have been ignored for a long time. You really have to have huge problems, be at the very bottom, to get any help at all, and even then it is very little"

These are the words of a secondary school special needs coordinator (SENCO) in an Outer London borough. One also hears these words uttered repeatedly by parents, SLTs and teachers of students with speech, language and communication needs (SLCNs) in secondary schools. The adolescent population with SLCNs has been for a long time a significantly under researched and under serviced population. This is despite the strong and growing evidence of the longer term impact of language and communication needs into adolescence and adulthood.

The research programme Enhancing Language and Communication in Secondary Schools (ELCISS), funded by the Nuffield Foundation, began in October 2006 and aims to address this gap in service provision. The programme is being conducted initially in 21 schools in two Outer London boroughs. The primary aims of the project are to explore the prevalence, nature and type of language and communication impairment in secondary school students, and to investigate the effectiveness of three speech and language support interventions delivered by teaching assistants (TAs) in improving the language and communication skills of secondary school students with SLCNs:

- narrative intervention programme
- vocabulary enrichment intervention programme
- combined narrative and vocabulary enrichment intervention programme

This study will measure the effectiveness of different levels and types of training given to teaching staff.

The initial recruitment of participants to the study, was based on Year 6 Standard Assessment Test Scores (SATs) for English. The national levels of attainment expected in Key Stage 2 (Year 6) is Level 4, with any score below Level 4 outside the expected range. All students obtaining a Level 4C or below in English SATs were referred to the programme. Teachers were asked to remove children who did not meet the specific subject selection criteria which included not having a global learning difficulty, English as a second language and other primary medical and behavioural

difficulties. To ensure as many children as possible with SLCNs were included, teachers of Year 7 children were given the opportunity to refer for assessment any additional children they believed met the study criteria. A total of 461 children across the two boroughs, whose parents gave permission to participate in the study, met these criteria and progressed on to the second stage of the programme: an in-depth baseline assessment of verbal and non-verbal abilities*. The male/female ratio of participants was 63%:37%. The majority of children identified had low scores on tests measuring vocabulary, recalling sentences and formulated sentences.

After the baseline assessment, a group of 340 children meeting the specific selection criteria for SLCNs in the context of better non-verbal abilities, progressed on to the pre-intervention assessment phase. Students were randomly assigned to one of four intervention groups: narrative, vocabulary, combined narrative and vocabulary and a delayed treatment group. One TA in each school will be administering all four intervention programmes. Training for the TAs has been completed and the intervention is currently taking place in the 21 schools. Ongoing support and contact is being provided to TAs through a website discussion forum, telephone contact, periodic group meetings and direct observations.

The schools and teaching staff have been introduced to the training programmes and there is much excitement from both teaching staff and students as evident from the quotes from a SENCO and some students. "*We believe the programme will be of great benefit to the school and children as its focus is on skills, a focus which is very much in keeping with the imminent changes in education*" SENCO. "*That lesson has made my day. I don't get to do this in class. I can't get to express myself in class*" 12 year old student participating in the ELCISS programme.

Once the intervention is complete, a post intervention assessment will be conducted for all students to investigate the effectiveness of the training programmes on language performance. Thereafter, the delayed intervention group will receive one of the three intervention programmes from the same TA, and the final post treatment assessment phase will be undertaken. Data will be collected from the perspective of the teacher, student and parent. The extent of any significant improvement in language and communication resulting from the interventions remains to be seen. However, what the ELCISS programme has already done is to highlight the importance of language and communication in participating secondary schools and it is providing specialist training for teaching staff in ways of supporting secondary school students with difficulties in language and communication.

* Please note these figures are approximations and reflect preliminary analysis of the data

Further information on the ELCISS programme can be found at: www.elciss.com

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Vocabulary intervention – putting it in context

Marysia Nash *and* ***Morag Donaldson*** *from Edinburgh highlight the importance of vocabulary learning*

Vocabulary skills play a key role both in effective communication and in educational achievement, but relatively little is known about how to support and enhance children's vocabulary development. Difficulties with vocabulary take a variety of forms and the limited evidence on prevalence suggests that many (though not all) children with specific language impairment (SLI) have significant vocabulary problems. There is also is a growing consensus that these difficulties are usually attributable to word-learning difficulties that make the acquisition of new lexical items slower or less efficient. This suggests that a fruitful approach to intervention for children with vocabulary problems may be to target word-learning abilities. This report summarises findings from a study conducted on the nature of word-learning difficulties in children with SLI (Nash and Donaldson, 2005), focusing on findings regarding the role of context. In particular, we ask whether word-learning difficulties are evident primarily in contexts where word meanings have to be inferred, or whether they are also evident in contexts where an adult provides explicit instruction about word meanings. Our results raise implications for existing and potential intervention approaches.

Our study compared word learning in 5 to 9 year old SLI children with poor receptive vocabularies and two groups of typically developing children with normal receptive vocabulary scores. The first group, the chronological-age controls (CAC), consisted of children matched on chronological age to the SLI group. The children in the second group, the vocabulary-age controls (VAC), were matched on vocabulary age to the SLI group and were therefore younger (4 to 5 year olds). All three groups were matched on non-verbal intelligence, which was within the normal range.

Each child was introduced to eight new words, four of which were presented in a story and four in an explicit teaching context. In the story, the children had to infer the meanings of the novel words (e.g. polka) from pictorial and linguistic clues, e.g. *Uncle Terry dragged Mum out of bed to do the* ***polka*** *with him* (with a picture of the characters dancing). In the explicit teaching context, the researcher gave the children a definition of the word while showing them a picture of it; e.g. *This is* ***mica****. Mica is a kind of stone.* For both contexts, each novel word was presented six times in each of two sessions. Immediately after each learning phase, the children's knowledge of the new words was assessed using five tests, which primarily assessed either phonological knowledge or semantic knowledge. We found that the SLI group had significant difficulties in learning new words compared to their chronological peers, and, on the whole, the SLI children performed at a similar level to the VAC children, who were approximately two-and-a-half years younger. The SLI group demonstrated word-learning difficulties in both contexts, although like the typically developing children, they were better at defining new words and answering questions about their meanings in the explicit teaching context than in the story context.

These findings have several inter-related implications for intervention. They suggest that children with SLI can derive benefit from being explicitly taught definitions, since they learnt more about word meaning in the explicit teaching than in the story context. However, the finding that even in the explicit teaching context the SLI group performed less well than their age-matched peers implies that explicit teaching should involve more than the provision of definitions. In addition, interventions should take account of the word-learning demands of incidental learning as well as explicit teaching contexts, since the children have difficulties with both and are likely to be introduced to new words in both types of context.

The conclusion that it is important to target the word-learning skills required for different types of context is consistent with current arguments that vocabulary programmes should be multi-faceted and should include both instruction about specific words and teaching children word-learning strategies that will help them to learn words independently. Approaches developed in the field offer some promise in addressing these requirements.

Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002) recommend explicit teaching of words through robust vocabulary instruction in a real school setting. The approach goes beyond definitions by providing activities in which children are given student-friendly explanations of the words' meanings and interact with the meanings in a variety of ways and contexts. It clearly describes the depth of instruction and the frequency of repetition required for children to be able to understand and use the words in different contexts. Thus, it may enhance the ability of children with SLI to learn from explicit teaching.

Intervention approaches that teach children strategies for independent word learning have also been developed (Baumann et al. 2003; Lubliner & Smetana, 2005). These approaches aim to help children expand their reading vocabularies by teaching them how word-part and context clues can support them in deriving the meanings of unfamiliar words. Such approaches have considerable potential to help children cope with the scale of the vocabulary learning task and with the fact that they encounter many unfamiliar words in incidental learning contexts. However, since the available cues will not always be sufficient to enable meanings to be inferred precisely and correctly, it is likely that the teaching of strategies will need to be supplemented with some explicit teaching of word meanings.

An important question for future research is whether vocabulary instruction and word-learning strategy approaches developed for use by teachers in mixed ability classrooms will be effective for use with specific vocabulary problems. Since these children's vocabulary problems have been shown to be associated with word-learning difficulties, there is a clear rationale for trying to enhance their word-learning strategies. If it turns out that similar approaches are beneficial to SLI children and to other children with poor vocabularies, then this would facilitate effective collaboration between SLTs and teachers in delivering support for children's vocabulary development, and in integrating this support with the vocabulary demands of the curriculum.

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Recasts as Corrective Input

Matthew Saxton and colleagues, Institute of Education, London

When adults talk to young children, they often pick up on what the child says and reflect it back to them with certain changes. In current terminology, the adult *recasts* the child utterance, as in examples (1) and (2) below:

(1) Child: You hold it.
Adult: I'll hold it, yeah.
(2) Child: A table.
Adult: Yeah, we'll have a little table here.

Recasts have a number of advantages. First, the adult can be more confident of gaining the child's attention, since one is talking about topics of interest to the child. And second, it is highly likely that the child will understand at least part of what is being said to them, since lexical items are being reflected back to the child from their own utterance. The adult thus maintains much of the child's original meaning. Recasts are an effective means of maintaining conversation with very young children. It is not surprising, therefore, that they figure frequently in adult-child conversation. Parents do not need to be prompted or trained to recast their children's speech. Instead, recasting occurs spontaneously. An easy way to guarantee conversational success is to follow the child's lead, taking what the child says as the basis for developing the discourse. At the Institute of Education, we have been exploring the potential of recasts as a form of corrective input for children's grammatical errors. In particular, we have been investigating those recasts where there is an immediate contrast between a child error and the correct form supplied by the adult, as in examples (3) to (5) below:

(3) Child: He's got **little nice** feet.
Adult: Oh, he *has* got **nice little** feet.
(4) Child: All by **her own**.
Adult: All by **herself**?
(5) Child: He **bited** someone.
Adult: He **bit** someone?

It may seem odd to think of recasts as a form of correction. But as can be seen, the adult supplies the correct form within a context that is supportive and which contributes to the flow of conversation. Crucially, though, the correct form is provided immediately following the child error. It is this direct contrast between erroneous and correct forms that allows this kind of recast to function as a form of correction.

Research on typical language development has shown that corrective recasts are effective in facilitating grammatical development. We are now exploring their use as a possible form of intervention for children with language delay. One difference between the typical and atypical children is the age at which recasts are supplied. In typical language development, recasts occur most frequently between the ages of two to three years. But for children with significant language delays, corrective recasts would still be appropriate at five years and beyond. It is perhaps less natural for adults to recast older children's speech. It may be beneficial, therefore, to raise the awareness of teachers, parents and others of the benefits of recasts. We believe they provide a simple but powerful form of language support for children who experience language delays.

Researchers, Jo van Herwegen and Eleri Bevan, illustrate the difficulties in finding a sample of children who fit the specifics of SLI.

We aimed to recruit as many children as possible between the ages of 4 and 6 with specific language impairment (SLI)from language units. It became clear early in the project that there was huge variation in the ability and range of difficulties experienced by the children with language delay who were referred to the project. Firstly, it was hard to find children with normal articulation in spite of severe language impairment. Half the children assessed exhibited specific problems with articulation. There was a low response rate to questionnaire completion by the parents. Of those questionnaires returned over half indicated that the children were exhibiting signs of Autism or Asperger's Syndrome. This suggests co-morbidity of language delay and several other developmental problems. We also found a huge variation within the language abilities of the participants. The majority of children had an overall language score well below the mean for their age, but some children were only delayed in expressive language and others in receptive vocabulary. In contrast, the scores of a third of the children identified for the project were within the normal range on all of the language tests. However, an analysis of grammatical errors in a language sample showed that these children made significant errors with particular grammatical structures including articles, auxiliaries and copula. Finally, there was a huge variation with the "talkativeness" of the participants. The findings show that even when rigid selection criteria are applied there is a significant variability in the language skills of the children. These data highlights the need to consider individual profiles in language skill and not rely on diagnostic categories or educational placements to determine interventions.

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